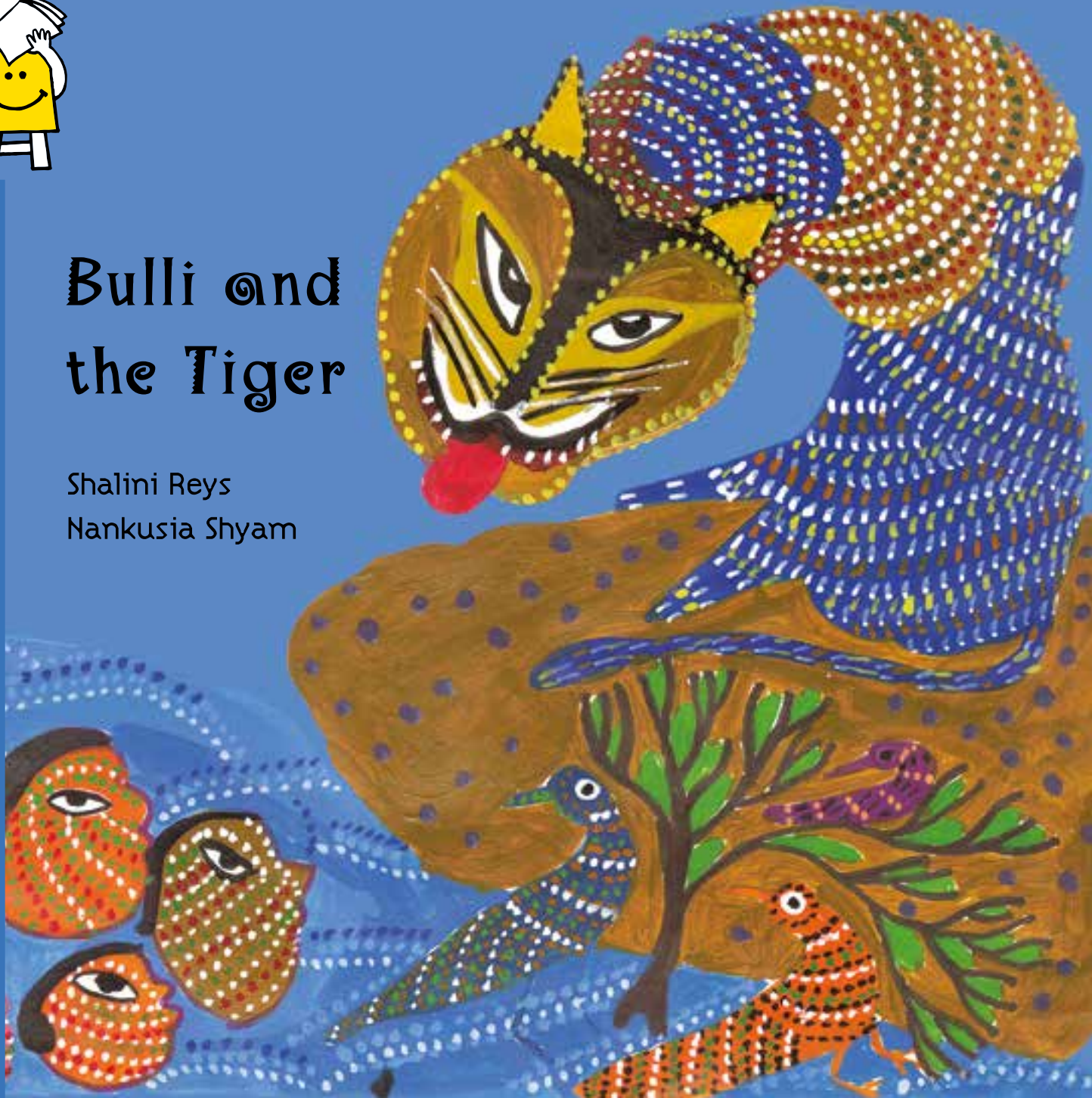
Bulli and the Tiger

Shalini Reys
Nankusia Shyam



LEVEL 4

'Bulli and the Tiger' by Shalini Reys

Illustrations: Nankusia Shyam

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Dastkari Haat Samiti is a large organization of Indian craftspeople, working to improve the social and economic status of people engaged in traditional handicraft skills. Local forms of painting and craftwork have been used illustrate this series of four stories to encourage the sharing of varied cultural expressions. This work was made possible with the support of UNESCO, New Delhi.

PRATHAM BOOKS

Bulli and the Tiger

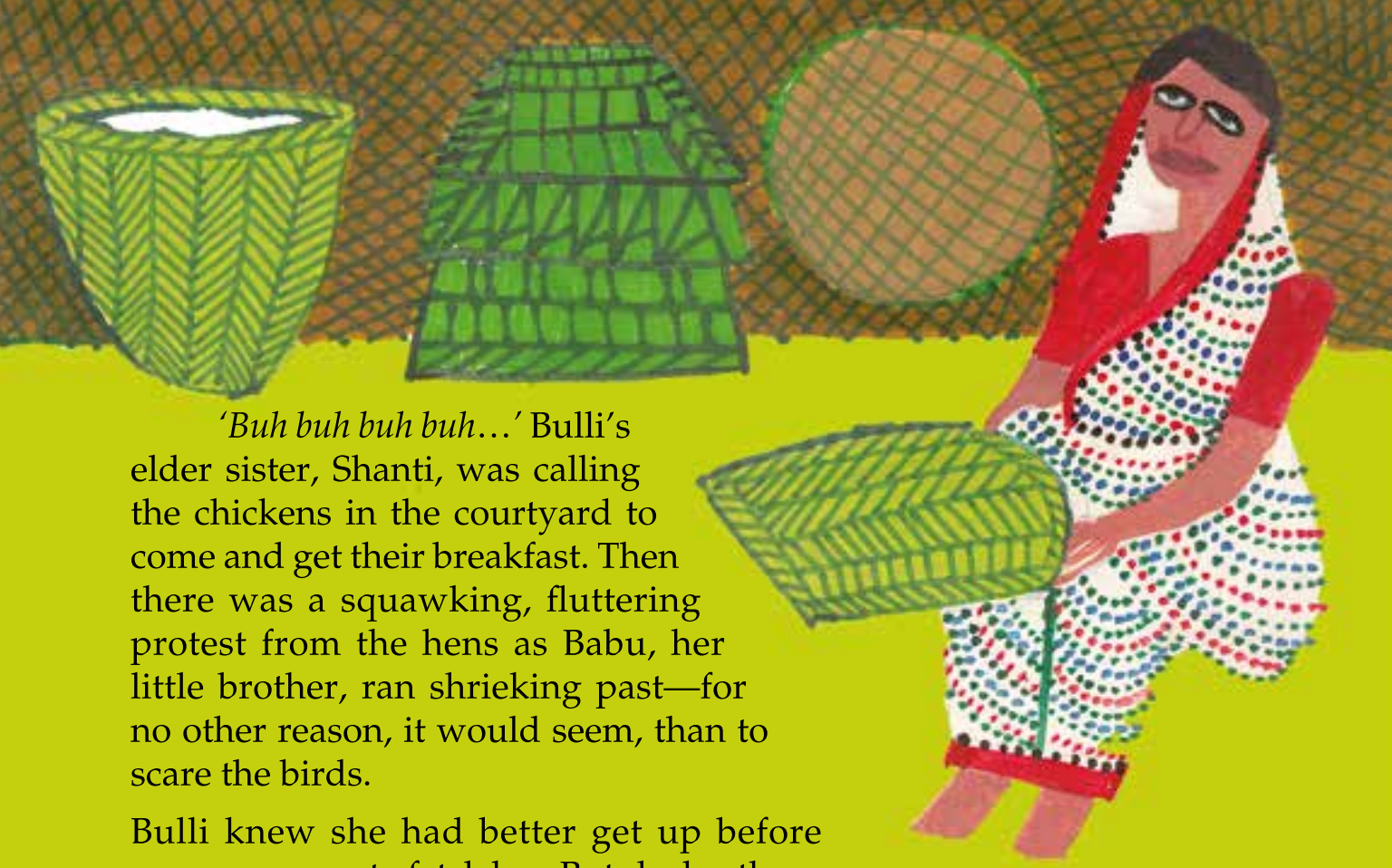
Written by Shalini Reys
Illustrated by Nankusia Shyam

About the illustrations

The art of the Pardhan-Gond tribals of the Dindori Valley in Mandla, Madhya Pradesh, uses tonal and contrasting colour blocks built up from dotted sections. The artists paint trees, shrubs, birds and animals in a powerful and lyrical way. Gond art is usually executed on the outside walls of the mud huts of the people.

Bulli groaned and stretched, forcing her eyes open. It was 4.30 in the morning and already dawn had crept into the room, spilling gently off her face on to the hard clay floor. The sun wakes up early in Assam and everyone is up and about at this hour.

Outside, the family had started on their chores. She could hear her mother and Aaita, her grandmother, sweeping floors and fanning the kitchen fire.



'Buh buh buh buh…' Bulli's elder sister, Shanti, was calling the chickens in the courtyard to come and get their breakfast. Then there was a squawking, fluttering protest from the hens as Babu, her little brother, ran shrieking past—for no other reason, it would seem, than to scare the birds.

Bulli knew she had better get up before someone came to fetch her. But she lay there a while longer, enjoying these last moments before the day came bustling in. Above her, three gaily-painted cardboard butterflies flitted across the bamboo wall.

Bulli's house was made of bamboo, like all the houses in her village, Baghdhora Tila. It had bamboo beams and walls of strong woven bamboo matting. Even the doors and sliding windows were made of bamboo, as were the gate in front of the house, the fence around it, the tall bins in which the rice was stored, the tea strainer and the fish traps.

Her father made baskets for a living.

Bulli got up and went to greet her father.

He sat by the door with Koka, her grandfather. There were rows of baskets stacked behind them. They looked grave. Odd, they weren't working as they talked. She tried to catch her father's attention. But Pita wasn't really listening. 'You'd better go and help your Aai,' he said absently. Something was very wrong.

But even her usually cheerful Aaita seemed worried this morning. What could be the matter?

Bulli quietly ate her breakfast, last night's spicy lentil *dhali*—a weekly treat and got ready for school, wondering what was troubling everyone.

'*Boo-lee-ee. O Boo-lee-e*!' It was Aloka at the gate. Bulli threw a few dog-eared books into her battered satchel and ran out. Bulli and Aloka had been friends forever. Their parents knew each other and it had been decided that Aloka's older brother, Probir dada, would one

day marry Bulli's sister Shanti. So they were almost family. They told each other everything.

Hand-in-hand, the girls set off on the two-kilometre trek to their school in the town. 'Something's wrong at home,' Bulli said. 'The grown-ups are all acting very strangely.'

'At my house too,' replied Aloka. 'Probir da came home from the market yesterday very grumpy. He wouldn't even talk to me. I wonder what's bothering them.'

'I know! I know!' They jumped, startled. It was Babu. For someone who couldn't be still for a moment, Babu could certainly move silently when he chose.

'What do you know?' asked Bulli.

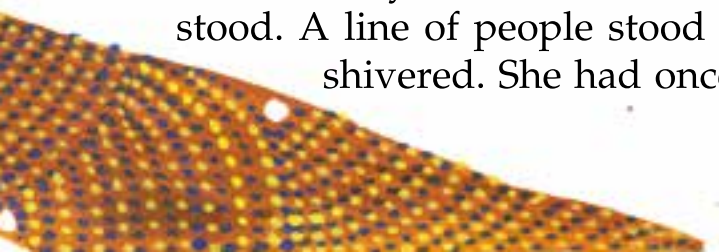
'What will you give me if I tell?'

'A slap on your face if you don't.'

Babu knew better than to mess with his sister when she used that tone. 'They can't get any more bamboo because the contractor is asking for too much money. Thousands of rupees. Pita does not have the money to bid directly for forest bamboo from the government. I heard them talking,' he blurted out as he danced jerkily ahead on the mud track.

They walked on in silence. This was serious.

In a while, they came to the outskirts of the town where the brick factory stood. A line of people stood at the gate, waiting to be let in. Bulli shivered. She had once carried bricks here with her parents



when the money had run short and they had to work for wages to make ends meet. Now they might have to come back. No bamboo meant no baskets to make and sell.

Her mind was racing as they got to school. Where could she get hold of bamboo for Pita's baskets?

Bulli was so deep in her thoughts that she hardly noticed the lessons go by. She hung her head, looking suitably repentant, when she was punished for not doing her homework. She rattled off the twelve times table with the rest of the class. She didn't even squeal when Khagen, the rowdiest boy in school, sent a pellet from his rubber-band catapult her way.

During the lunch break, instead of joining the regular game of *oluguti-toluguti*, Bulli huddled in a corner with Aloka, trying to figure out a way to help their families.

The remaining lessons too went by in a blur. And when the gong sounded for the end of school, the two friends didn't hang around the school compound as they usually did, but headed straight home.

'Meet me in one hour by the hanging bridge,' Bulli told Aloka as they parted ways.

Bulli had a plan. But she needed a sharp implement—like an axe or a knife. She knew where she could find one.

Her grandmother was spreading *amla* to dry on a mat by the jars of lemons and olives pickling in the sun.

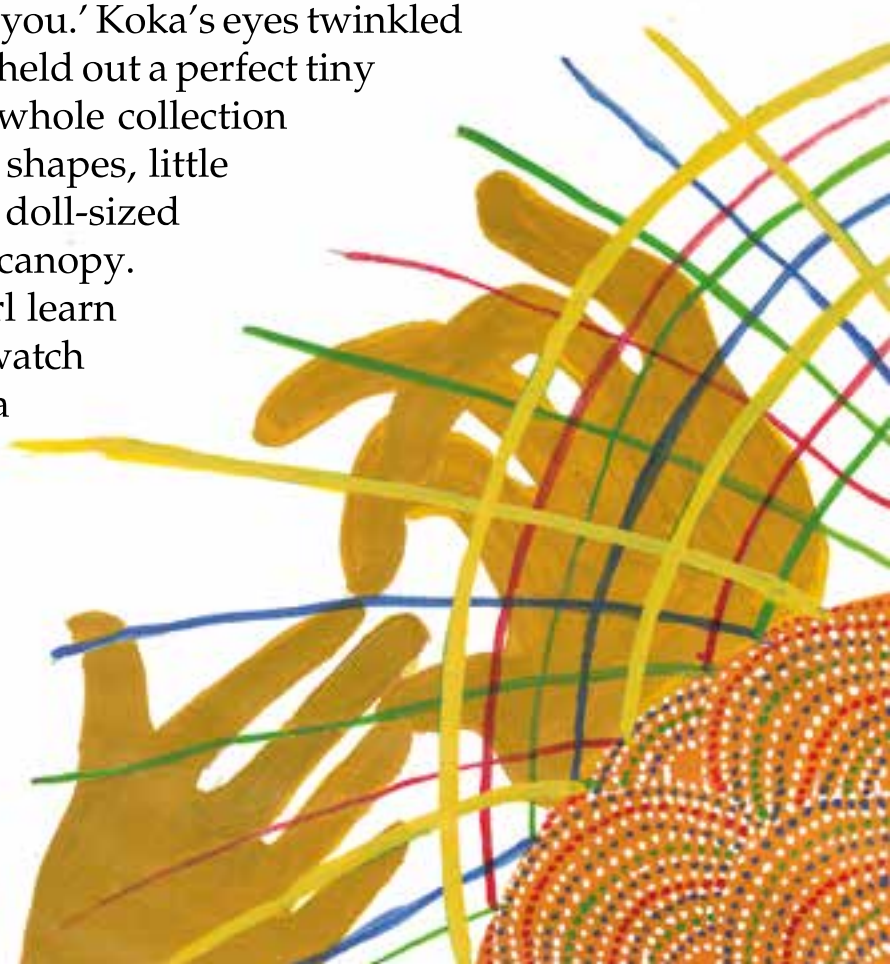
‘Aaita, where’s Pita?’ Bulli tried to sound casual. Better not to arouse suspicion. Grown-ups had a way of stepping in and spoiling everything.

‘Gone to Guwahati with Probir da, to look for bamboo,’ replied Aaita, swatting away her granddaughter’s hand from the sour gooseberries. Too late. Bulli had grabbed a handful, and scampered off.

She found her grandfather in the work shed. Good, he was alone, at least for now. Babu was off somewhere–-probably tormenting Shanti or playing *pitthoo* with his friends.

‘Look, I’ve got something for you.’ Koka’s eyes twinkled behind the thick lenses as he held out a perfect tiny basket. He had made her a whole collection of these toys—baskets in all shapes, little chairs, sofas, tables, even a doll-sized bullock cart complete with canopy. ‘And what did my clever girl learn at school today? We’d better watch out or soon she will become a scholar and go to Delhi. And then she’ll become prime minister and start bossing us around.’

Bulli giggled. ‘Koka, Koka, tell me a story.’ She looked around the shed. The heap of bamboo stems, usually



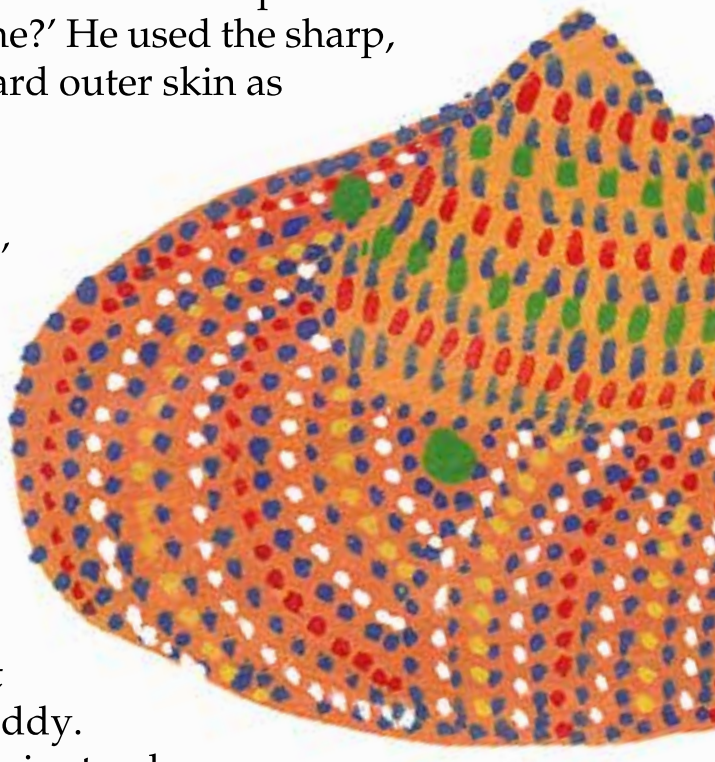
stacked almost to the ceiling, was now reduced to just a small pile.

Koka expertly sliced a length of bamboo into smaller pieces. 'And which one do you want to hear this time?' He used the sharp, broad blade of his *dao* to peel off the hard outer skin as he spoke.

'The tiger story, the tiger story.'

'Don't you ever tire of hearing that one?'

In one quick move, Koka had halved a piece lengthwise. *Shuk shuk shuk*, with lightning speed the dao split the bamboo. Then a bend and a turn, and the fine, even strips fanned out between his fingers.

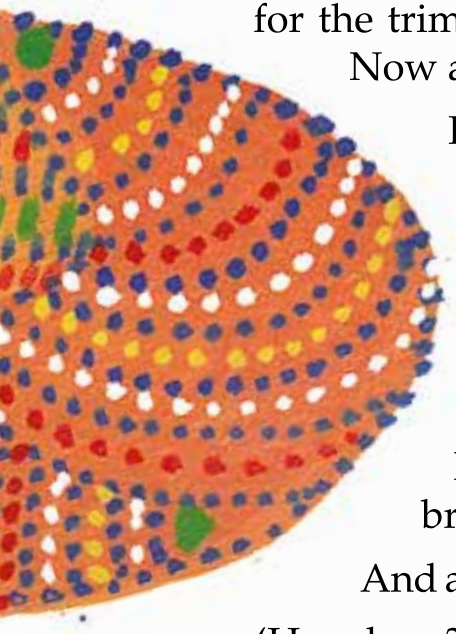


These were for *japis*, the wide-brimmed, upside-down ice-cream cone hats that farmers wore while transplanting paddy. The rains were over this year, and the grain stood ripening in the fields. So these japis would be lined with patches of coloured felt or metallic paper, with trimmings of sequins, braid and baubles, to decorate the walls at festival time.

Koka counted out five strips and crossed them over the tip of the mould he used to shape the crown. Bulli had seen him do this a thousand times, but she still watched as he wove more strips around and across the frame. The cone done, his fingers moved swiftly around the base, adding strips

and weaving them to form the shade and then the turned-down brim. Soon the outer layer of the japi was done — a net of five-pointed stars. He started on the inner layer.

Bulli picked up a pair of scissors to cut the shiny paper into neat triangles for the trimming. In the corner, she spied Pita's dao. Excellent! Now all she had to do was smuggle it out of the house.



Koka finished the inner lining of the japi. He arranged the papers Bulli handed him and sandwiched them between the two layers. Slightly wider bamboo strips were placed across the underside of the shade for strength. Then a hoop around the base of the cone and another around the rim, secured with string to hold the layers in place, and it was ready. All that was left now was to glue on some sequins and a length of braid around the brim.

And as they worked, Koka told his story. 'A long time ago…'

'How long?' Bulli wanted to know.

'Don't interrupt, child…

'It was in my koka's koka's koka's pita's time–maybe even before that. There were only five houses by the river, with the hill behind and the jungle all around. The people grew rice and vegetables for themselves, and whatever little was extra they sold in the market.

'One year, the rains fell harder than usual. The sky was black as coal, even in the morning. The sun fell asleep, thinking it was night. The rain

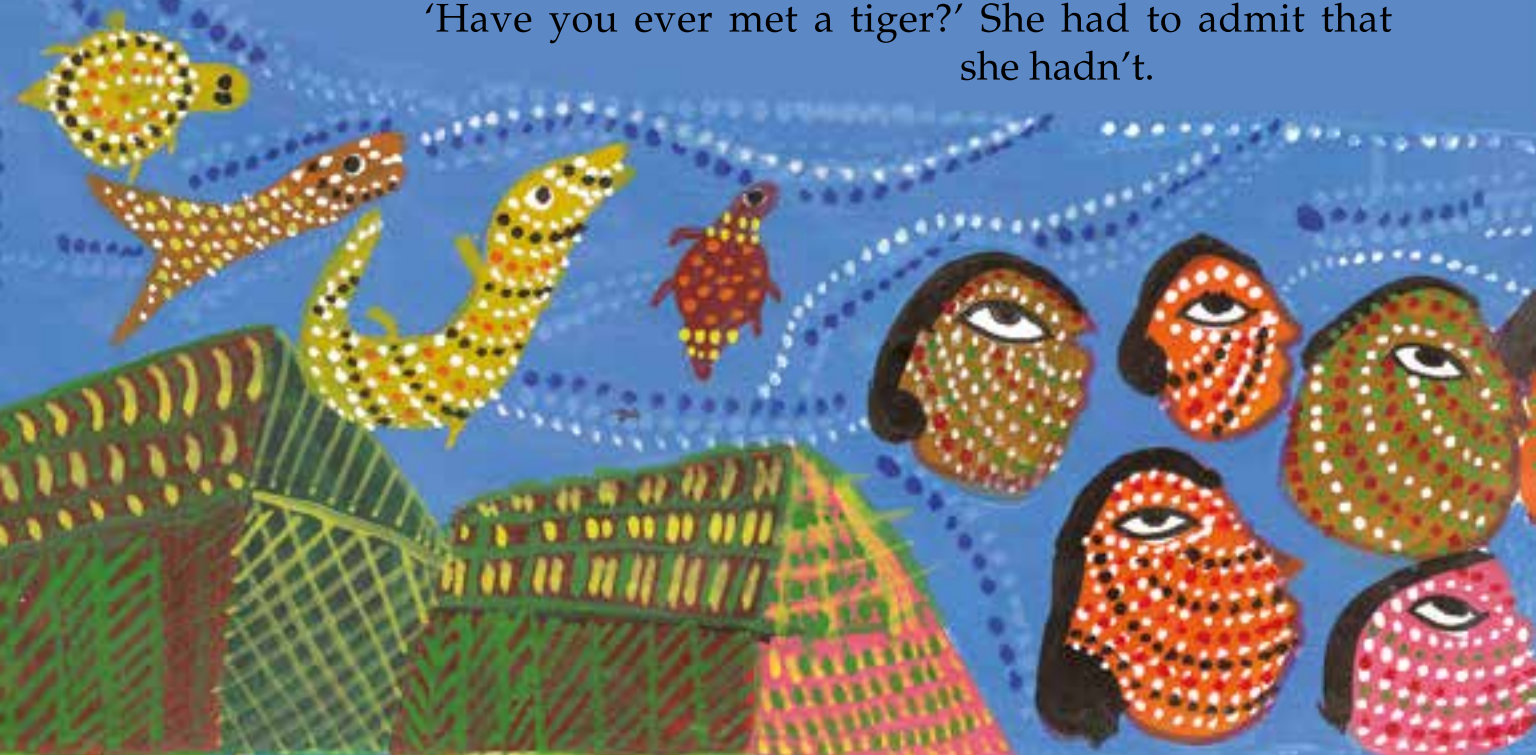
kept pouring down. The river rose, higher and higher, until the dam burst and the water flooded over into the fields towards our village.

'And still the downpour continued. The water was knee-high by now and still rising. The people were afraid. They huddled together, wet and hungry. If they didn't do something soon, their belongings would be washed away and they would drown.

'Then they heard it. *Brroouuaarrrrr… aabrrooaarrr…* so loud that the rain stopped and the sun peeped out from behind the clouds to see what was going on. Way up, on the top of the hill stood a tiger–handsome, huge, his coat glistening like pure gold. He was calling to them. *Brroouuaarrrrr… aabrrooaarrr… come up heeerrreerr …*'

'But tigers can't speak our language,' Bulli cut in.

'Have you ever met a tiger?' She had to admit that she hadn't.



‘Then how do you know they can’t?’ he asked. ‘At first the people were afraid to go. They’d never been up the hill before and they weren’t sure that this wasn’t a trick. They certainly didn’t want to become a tasty meal for some wild animal.

‘The tiger saw them hesitate. *Brroouuaarrrrr… aabrrooaarrr… come up heeerrreerr wherrrre it’s dry and safe…* He roared again, trying to sound as friendly as he could.

‘This time they went. They hadn’t much choice. The tiger came halfway down the slope to lead them safely to the top. The villagers followed him. They were not afraid any more. He was a kind tiger. He had saved them from the flood.

‘Up on the hill, there were ponds and streams full of fish, plenty of fruit trees and bamboo groves. The villagers were pleased to find such a beautiful spot to build their new homes. But now something else troubled them. Their fields were left far behind, at the bottom of the hill. What would they do for a living?

‘*Ahem, aabrrooaarrr… I couldn’t help overhearing… If you’ll perrrmitt me to make a suggestion…* It was the tiger who had been standing nearby and was as well-mannered as he was kind. *Follow me, if you please.* He led them to a bamboo grove. *There’s plenty of bamboo here for you to use. It’s strong and waterproof—good for building houses and supple enough to make baskets, which you can sell in the market. People always need baskets in which to carry and store.*

‘With one sweep of a front paw the tiger knocked down a stem and shredded it into strips with his claws. Then he showed them how to weave mats and baskets. And then he was gone. He disappeared into the thick jungle. But they knew he was watching them from behind the trees.

‘So they set about rebuilding their village, which they named Baghdhora

Tila, in honour of the *bagh*, the tiger, on the *tila*, the hill, who saved them from the flood and taught them a new craft.

'And that is how we came to be here and to weave baskets for a living.'

'What happened to the tiger?' Bulli was getting restless by now, but she knew she was expected to ask.

'Oh, he's still around. Lives in the forest and watches over the village. They say he appears every once in a while to help us in times of trouble.'

Bulli stood up. 'I have to get the fish,' she said by way of explanation.

She went over to the corner where the tools were kept and made a big show of putting away the scissors and metallic paper. When she left the work shed, she was carrying, hidden in the folds of her skirt, her father's dao.

Bulli picked up her gear. She and Aloka went out every afternoon to get fish for dinner. It was part of their daily routine, so no one paid much heed. Bulli hid the dao in the fish basket and ran out.

Aloka was already at the hanging bridge that stretched and swayed across the stream separating the jungle from their village. 'Did you get it?' she asked.

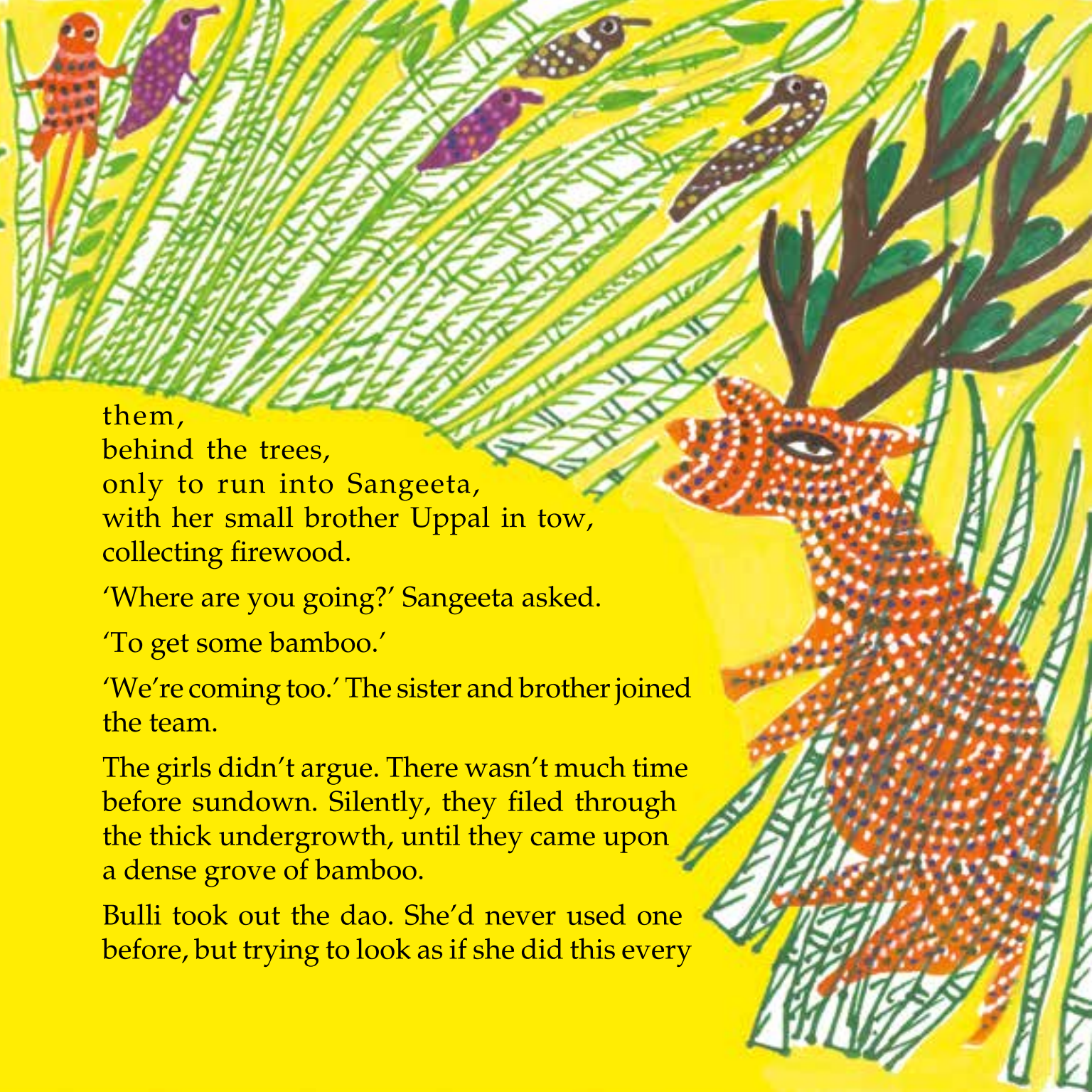
'It's here,' Bulli patted the basket at her waist. 'Let's get the fish first,' she added.

The hillside was dotted with shallow ponds, teeming with silvery fish that fed on the water plants. Bulli and Aloka dipped their bamboo bottle-shaped fish catchers into one, then lifted them out. They picked out the

weeds and threw the fish into their baskets. Soon their baskets were full.

The girls headed back towards the hanging bridge. The plan was to go into the jungle and bring back some bamboo for their parents. Finding the bamboo would be no problem. It grew in thick clumps all over the forest. Bulli and Aloka were sure they could carry the bamboo back to the village. They'd balanced five bricks each on their heads during their time at the factory. How they would get it into their houses without being found out was entirely another matter. Their luck had held so far. They could only pray that their parents would be so happy to see the bamboo that they wouldn't think to ask how it got there. Pleased with their clever plan, the two friends crossed into the forest.

Oh no! They weren't alone. Babu and Khagen were kicking a dented plastic ball around the clearing. Bulli and Aloka slipped quietly past



them,
behind the trees,
only to run into Sangeeta,
with her small brother Uppal in tow,
collecting firewood.

'Where are you going?' Sangeeta asked.

'To get some bamboo.'

'We're coming too.' The sister and brother joined the team.

The girls didn't argue. There wasn't much time before sundown. Silently, they filed through the thick undergrowth, until they came upon a dense grove of bamboo.

Bulli took out the dao. She'd never used one before, but trying to look as if she did this every

day, she touched its sharp blade to the stem. There was a crunch and a thud behind them. They froze.

'*Whoooo, whoooo*-I'm the ghost of the jungle. What are you doing on my land?'

They laughed, half-relieved. Babu and Khagen had found them.

'Here, you'd better give me that. I know how to use these things.' Khagen made a grab for the dao.

'*Shhh!*' Aloka put her finger to her lips. They heard a rustling in the trees. Something moved. This was beginning to get scary.

Uppal let out a howl. 'I don't like this place. I want to go home.'

Bulli, the bravest of them all, took command. 'Sangeeta, tell your brother to shut up. Babu, stop fidgeting! I'm going to have a look.'

With a bit of shoving, the group squatted on the ground watching intently as Bulli moved towards the sound.

The rustling grew louder. A twig snapped. They distinctly saw a yellow stripe flash past. Bulli's courage disappeared. She turned and ran. The others followed, their hearts pounding. They didn't stop until they reached the bridge.

'Where's the dao?' Bulli asked Khagen panting.

'I don't know. I thought you had it.'

'Well, we'd better go back and look for it.'

‘You go—it’s your dao.’ Khagen’s brashness scarcely disguised the panic in his voice.

Only Aloka was willing to go with Bulli. They held hands as they retraced their steps through the jungle.

The dao lay where Khagen had dropped it. And there next to it was a broken stem of bamboo. ‘So that’s what got those scaredy-cats so frightened!’ they laughed.

Dusk was falling. The birds were calling to each other from their roosts. The frogs croaked and splashed in the ponds and the crickets had already started their chirruping. Soon the night would swoop down on them. They girls knew they had better get home soon.

It took them a while to realize they were lost. One wrong turn somewhere had taken them deeper into the jungle than they had ever been before. Bulli and Aloka clung to each other trembling, wondering which way to go.

Then they heard it. A slow, majestic swish. Everything else had gone silent. They strained to get a better look in the half-light. This was no bamboo stem. Could it be? A flash of a gold and brown striped tail?

Bulli remembered Koka’s story. They must follow the sound. Trustingly, they went with the *crackle, pop, swish,* through the thick foliage, on to the track leading to the hanging bridge. They couldn’t see much—just the hint of a whisker, the twitch of an ear and, once, a glint of kind amber eyes that seemed to say, *No need to worry. I will show you the way.*

The girls turned to thank their friend—but there was no one there. Just the jungle noise behind them and the village lights up ahead.

Bulli said goodnight to Aloka, and ran off. They would talk about what they had seen tomorrow. She had to get home and put the dao in its usual place before it was missed.

She had just replaced the dao and was handing the fish to Aai with some excuse about being so late, when they heard the gate open. Pita was back from Guwahati. He was smiling.

The family crowded round him, eager to hear the news. 'We found a dealer in the city willing to sell us bamboo at the old price if we bought a large enough quantity,' he said happily. 'So we ordered enough for all the basket weavers. They'll be sending a truck tomorrow.'

Bulli was bursting to tell her own story. So, amid all the excitement, without being asked, she announced to no one in particular, 'Aloka and I met a tiger in the jungle today.'

Everybody laughed. 'Don't be silly,' said Shanti in her best older-sister tone. 'There aren't any tigers here any more.'

Bulli looked at her grandpa. He didn't say anything. But behind the spectacles she saw the wink and smiled. Koka knew!

Read India

Pratham Books was set up in 2004, as part of the Read India movement, a nation-wide campaign to promote reading among children. Pratham Books is a not-for-profit organization that publishes quality books for children in multiple Indian languages. Our mission is to see "a book in every child's hand" and democratize the joy of reading. If you would like to contribute to our mission, please email us at info@prathambooks.org.

Shalini Reys has worked in corporate and NGO communications for many years, writing for both film and print media. She is especially interested in crafts and the folk performing arts, and enjoys writing for children.

Nankusiya Shyam illustrates in the Gondi style of painting. She works as an assistant artist at the Kala Bhavan, an art museum in Bhopal, and has participated in art exhibitions in Bhopal, Delhi, Jaipur and Kerala.

Bulli is a little girl growing up in Assam, in a basket-weavers' community. When the bamboo suppliers threaten to raise the rates and put their whole village in jeopardy, Bulli knows she has to find other ways of finding bamboo, even if it means facing the legendary tiger! Shalini Reys's adventure-filled story is illustrated by Nankusiya Shyam in the Gond style.

Titles in this series :

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Bulli and the Tiger

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